

# SAIGON'S FORCES HOLDING IN NORTH

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But the Shifting of Reserve  
Units Has Left Many Areas  
Vulnerable to Vietcong

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, April 23—The North Vietnamese offensive, now in its fourth week, is showing no sign of diminishing in intensity.

There are apparent stalemates, for the moment, on the two main fronts, at Anloc north of Saigon, and in the area south of the demilitarized zone, but intelligence officials believe that new enemy moves may be imminent in both areas.

But while the future course of the fighting is necessarily uncertain, some points are clear about what has happened so far.

After giving way to the North Vietnamese onslaught in Quangtri Province on April 1 and in the northern part of Binhlong Province on April 5, South Vietnamese troops, heavily reinforced, have held tenaciously to their fallback positions in both places for more than two weeks despite heavy enemy artillery bombardment and repeated thrust with tanks. To do it, the South Vietnamese have depended heavily on their own and American air power.

## Reserve Forces Deployed

The determined North Vietnamese pushes against Quangtri and Anloc, and the expectation of an equally determined one in the Central Highlands, quickly forced the Saigon Government to commit its entire strategic reserve force—the 10,000-man airborne division, the 13,000 men of the three marine brigades and the 34,000 rangers—to the three fronts.

It now appears that the strategic reserve force was inadequate and the Government has had to deprive many relatively pacified areas of the country of their regular defenses and throw them into the large-scale fighting. As a result, local Vietcong units in the heavily populated Mekong Delta area, from which the 21st Division had been pulled out, and on the central coast in Binhdin and Quangngai Provinces have expelled all Government presence from a number of districts.

The biggest expected offensive of all, in the Central Highlands region around Pleiku and Kontum Provinces, has not yet begun on the same scale as in Binhlong and Quangtri.

## Main Roads Cut by Enemy

But Communist troops have already succeeded in cutting the main roads into and out of the area, and it will be difficult for Government forces to resupply and reinforce installations in the highlands if the big push, expected to be made by 30,000 to 40,000 North Vietnamese troops from the mountains in the west, does come.

The United States Government, despite repeated assurances by all high officials of their faith in the ability of the South Vietnamese forces to withstand the enemy assaults, found it necessary to pour hundreds of jet fighter-bombers and B-52's back into the Southeast Asian war zone to support the Government troops.

There has actually been an increase of probably 20,000 Americans in the area of operations over the last three weeks, although the number of troops in Vietnam is on its way down to 69,000 by May 1. The increase is in the greatly bolstered Seventh Fleet aircraft carrier and naval gunfire force offshore and the five American air bases in Thailand, for which American planes have been carrying out missions against North Vietnam every day since April 6.

As a result of the renewed combat, grave and perhaps irredeemable damage has been done to pacification, the collection of military and political programs intended to establish the Saigon Government's legitimacy in rural and outlying areas that have long been under contention.

## Many Forced to Flee

An estimated total of 250,000 people who have had to flee their homes because of the fighting are unlikely to take seriously, at least for a long time, the assertions of the government that they will be protected and safe, under its rule.

Attacks by the Vietcong, as distinguished from those of the North Vietnamese, have been limited so far to rural areas like Binhdin, where their strength has remained impressive over the years. So far, there has been no general uprising of the kind that had scores of South Vietnamese cities and towns in flames in the enemy's great Lunar New Year offensive of 1968.

Whether this is because the Communists plan to conduct their 1972 offensive in phases, as American intelligence officials believe, or because the Vietcong forces in many areas are too weak to do anything, as some military men suggest, will become clear only with the passage of time.

The North Vietnamese offensive on both the major fronts, at Quangtri and Binhlong, has been a more or less conventional campaign unlike those that enemy forces have waged

in South Vietnam over the last few years. What makes it not wholly conventional is their way of infiltrating their men and tanks through the jungles, despite electronic devices and bombers, and then suddenly showing up in force to assault Government positions in the open.

## Forward Bases Seized

The offensive began in the last few days of March, when the North Vietnamese forces began shooting thousands of rounds of heavy artillery fire and rockets from inside and north of the demilitarized zone at a string of 15 well-entrenched forward bases manned by the South Vietnamese Third Division, which had taken them over from American troops beginning in 1970.

Although United States Marines had been able to hold these bases under heavy shelling, the Third Division, a newly formed force that was not prepared for the intense attacks, fell back, in disarray in many cases, to the towns the bases were supposed to protect, Quangtri city and Dongha, which since April 2 have been on the new South Vietnamese line of defense in the north.

The North Vietnamese—there are believed to be 20,000 to 30,000 of them from the 304th and 308th Divisions and artillery and engineer regiments—advanced under cover of heavy clouds while using Soviet-built surface-to-air missiles for protection from American and South Vietnamese air attacks.

The enemy's antiaircraft defenses have been so heavy that at least a dozen United States planes and helicopters have been shot down since the offensive in Quangtri Province began. At least 30 crew members are dead or missing. The exact numbers are not known because the United States command delays announcing such aircraft losses until all possibility of rescuing crewmen has been given up.

Effective as the North Vietnamese forces on the northern front were in the first days of the offensive, they showed some puzzling shortcomings.

Although the Communists

had more than 100 Soviet-built heavy and light amphibious tanks in the area, the North Vietnamese tactics in using them were ineffective and small assaults by tank companies — six or eight of the tracked vehicles at a time without a simultaneous infantry attack — were easily repelled by the South Vietnamese, who used their own tanks, artillery and aerial bombardment to destroy the enemy armor.

Neither local Vietcong units nor infiltrated North Vietnamese detonation squads succeeded in blowing up bridges on Route 1, the main road leading to Quangtri city, in time to prevent the South Vietnamese from reinforcing the Third Division with a brigade of 2,000 Marines and nine ranger battalions of about 400 men each. The reinforcements, plus air power, are credited with having staved off the fall of Quangtri city in the early stages of the offensive.

#### SOMETHING WENT WRONG

In an indication that something had gone wrong, North Vietnamese engineers were trying to destroy one main bridge leading north from Quangtri city to Dongha as late as April 10, well after the Government reinforcements had arrived.

One American officer suggested that the North Vietnamese had not counted on being able to take the fifteen fire bases between the demilitarized zone and Dongha city as quickly as they did—in two days—and had outrun their own timetable.

Since then the South Vietnamese forces have held off all further attempts by the North Vietnamese to move in on the coastal lowlands from the mountains to the west.

"In 1968 we had the U.S. Third Marine Division, and the 101st Airborne Division, and the First South Vietnamese Division up in those areas, and the North Vietnamese were inside Hue on the first day of the Tet offensive," one American official said the other day. "It took the Americans, with rein-

## Saigon Puts Foe's Dead At 13,000, Own at 3,000

SAIGON, South Vietnam, April 23 (AP)—Military sources said today that the South Vietnamese had suffered at least 10,000 military casualties, including about 3,000 men killed, since North Vietnam launched its offensive three and a half weeks ago.

Enemy losses, according to estimates by senior allied officials, are 13,000 killed. There was no estimate of the enemy wounded and missing.

Until Thursday, South Vietnamese officials had withheld all casualty figures for the offensive, which began March 30.

The military sources said the casualty figures for the South Vietnamese were based on reported losses for the first 15 days of April, plus an estimate that losses have remained at least constant since then.

One source noted that the figures might be on the conservative side because they did not include casualties for the last two days of March.

reinforcements, a month to drive them out. This year there's only the First and Third [South Vietnamese] Divisions up there and they've not got in yet."

What will happen if the North Vietnamese succeed in bringing up reinforcements to the Quangtri front, as they are believed to be doing now, cannot be foreseen.

But the focus of the Government's attention has shifted to Binhlong and Binhduong Provinces, 30 miles and more north of Saigon, where an estimated total of 20,000 to 30,000 North Vietnamese troops began moving south on Route 13 from base areas in eastern Cambodia on April 5.

Easily overrunning the district headquarters of Locninh, the North Vietnamese encircled and took under siege Anloc, the provincial capital, where a garrison of 6,000 to 7,000 men has

been under daily bombardment ever since.

Realizing the seriousness of the attacks there, the Government pulled the 21st Infantry Division out of the Mekong Delta on April 8 and its 10,000 men began moving north up Route 13 to try to relieve Anloc.

The division stalled about 10 miles south of Anloc and after repeated attempts to break through the Communist siege, it gave up last week. Its mission now is to defend its own flank and rear between Laikhe and the farthest point of its advance. Meanwhile, a brigade of 2,000 airborne troops that had been spearheading the advance was lifted out by helicopter and dropped into Anloc to reinforce the troops there.

The North Vietnamese showed at Anloc the same inept use of tanks as they did in the north, at Quangtri, and the south Vietnamese have held to the southern two-thirds of the town though suffering hundreds of casualties.

A large-scale offensive in the Central Highlands has been expected ever since North Vietnamese troops of the 320th Division began infiltrating into Koonum in January and February.

#### Rainy Season to Begin Soon

Intelligence sources believe that the enemy may be waiting until the beginning of the rainy season in the highlands next month to begin their attacks. In the meantime, they have cut the roads, including the main east-west link, Route 19 at the Ankhe Pass, and if they keep them cut, the only way for the Government to resupply its forces will be by air.

But when the rains come, they make air operations in the highlands almost impossible. Having the roads cut and air

supply operations interrupted could soon prove disastrous.

So at the moment, there is cause for both optimistic and pessimistic judgments about the course of the enemy offensive.

The South Vietnamese have stopped their enemies on each major front, keeping them from taking control of either Quangtri or Binhlong Province or getting into Hue, but whether they can continue to stop them is a major question.

And the North Vietnamese are determined not to stop attacking, intelligence officials believe, until they have clearly succeeded on at least one of the fronts.